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ABSTRACT

The effects of nursery school experience on the self-concepts of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children were assessed. Subjects were 434 kindergarten children attending five public schools located in low socioeconomic areas and five public schools not considered to be serving a disadvantaged population. Self concept was evaluated through the use of the Pictorial Self-Concept Scale which involves self rating by the child. Results indicate the existence of significantly higher self-concept scores for the nursery school as opposed to non-nursery school group. Also, the scores for the non-disadvantaged group were higher than those of the disadvantaged group, and girls' scores were higher than boys'. Results are discussed in terms of the importance of preschool experience. Limitations in the research design are acknowledged. (DP)

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SELF-CONCEPT OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD AND ITS MODIFICATION THROUGH COMPENSATORY NURSERY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

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The effects of organized preschool activity on the self-concepts of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged kindergarten children are the concerns of this study. The term "disadvantaged" has become a standard label attached to children of the poor who suffer various social, intellectual, emotional, and physical restrictions. Manifestations of the effects of poverty on children may be seen in American schools. Among the disadvantaged are found severe scholastic retardation, a drop-out rate exceeding 50 percent, and extremely thin participation in higher education (Passow and Elliott, 1970). The public school, as an institution of the larger society, has failed to meet the needs of the disadvantaged child. Such a student is exposed to repeated frustrations and failure, and consequently often develops an inhibiting fear of continued failure. He may be apprehensive of teachers who are ignorant of the culture in which he is being reared, and who may have low expectations for his success. The world of the school often is alien to him. If he is unable to accommodate to the demands of the classroom, he may be caught in the cycle of poverty, failure, and despair (Black, 1965). At an early age the disadvantaged child lags behind his middle-class counterparts socially and academically, and there is evidence that the deficits are cumulative (Ausubel, 1964; Findley, 1964; Krugman, 1961; Osborne, 1960; Rioux, 1967.) Educators and psychologists must identify factors contributing to the syndrome of failure in disadvantaged children and take steps to remedy and prevent such deficits while the child is young.

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Much research has been aimed at identifying cognitive handicaps of the disadvantaged; but limited attention is given to the development of important personality characteristics. Self-concept is a variable that may be an important consideration in the education of the disadvantaged. Sometimes deprived of adequate environmental interaction, and in the face of physically and psychologically harsh living conditions, the disadvantaged child is likely to develop an imprecise conception of his own abilities and identity. He assimilates and internalizes the evaluations, labels, and attitudes of others. These tend to be negative for the disadvantaged child who is reared in an unfavorable environment and attends a school whose curriculum is not geared to his needs. The child is often characterized by low self-esteem, self-deflation, and self-depreciation (Hamachek, 1971; Hawk, 1967).

Research for assessing the self-concepts of disadvantaged children has not revealed consistent results. Several studies indicate that there are no significant differences between the self-concepts of low-income, culturally different or inner-city children and the general population (Coopersmith, 1967, DeBlassie and Healy, 1970; Kerensky, 1967; McDaniel, 1967). Evidence from some sources suggests that social deprivation does have detrimental effects on building a positive self-concept (Goff, 1954; Gordon and Wilkerson, 1966; Gordon, 1969; Hillery, Lingren, and Remstad, 1969; Minuchin, 1968). Other findings indicate disadvantaged children develop elevated self-concepts, [redacted] children to be higher than those of advantaged children. Definite conclusions are difficult to draw since the studies used different means of assessing self-concept, varying age groups, and different definitions of disadvantaged.

Self-perception is indeed related to school achievement and to learning in general (Combs, 1952; Frerichs, 1970; Ozehosky and Clark, 1970; Zirkel, 1971). In view of this relationship and considering the possibility that disadvantaged children may have depressed self-concepts, many educators are advocating development of positive self-concepts as a part of the school program. Many have suggested implementation of programs to develop self-concept at the preschool and early elementary level while the potential for personality modification is still relatively high (DeVault, 1968; Gordon, 1971; Prescott, Jones, and Kritchevsky, 1972, Rees, 1968). This objective is common to some compensatory programs designed to help the disadvantaged child (Bouchard and Mackler, 1967; Early Childhood Project, 1969).

The influence of compensatory programs on self-concept has been investigated in a few studies. Positive effects of intervention on self-concept have been reported (Bolea, 1968; Kerensky, 1967; Lamb, Ziller, and Maloney, 1965; Mc Namara, Porterfield, Miller, and Arnold, 1968; Nimnicht, 1967; Pierce-Jones, et. al., 1968; Trowbridge, 1970).

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* Trowbridge (1970) and Soares and Soares (1969) found the self-concepts of disadvantaged [redacted]

Several researchers have reported less positive effects of preschool experience indicating that compensatory programs do not aid self-concept development (Cicirelli, et al., 1969; Hillery, Lingren, and Remstad, 1969; Olsen, 1969; VanKoughnett and Smith, 1969.)

Although the rationale for preschool education is widely accepted, little is known about the affective variables influenced by intervention.

PROBLEM

The effects of nursery school on the self-concepts of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children were measured at kindergarten.

It was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference between those who attended nursery school and those who did not attend, in favor of the nursery school children.

METHOD

The subjects were 434 kindergarten children attending public schools in Mishawaka, Indiana, in February of 1972. Five of the schools, referred to as target schools, were located in low socioeconomic areas and qualified for Title I funds. The remaining five schools were considered non-target schools since they did not serve a disadvantaged population. The entire kindergarten population of the ten schools (with a few exceptions due to absenteeism or lack of biographical data) were administered the Pictorial Self-Concept Scale (PSC) (Bolea, Felker, and Barnes, 1970)[1] in their classrooms.

The Pictorial Self-Concept Scale (PSC) was selected for measuring the self-concept of the children because it can be administered easily to a group of children and requires no special training. The PSC measures self-concept with regard to Jersild's categories (Jersild, 1952) of what children said they liked and disliked about themselves. Each of Jersild's categories is represented in the test, with the exception of "privacy." The test materials consist of a deck of fifty cartoon pictures drawn on 3x5 cards with a central starred figure, either male or female depending on the sex of the child. Each child is asked to separate

1. A sample set of the PSC may be ordered from ED Corp., 822 North Salisbury Street, West Lafayette, IN., 47906 for $1.50.

the cards into three color-coded piles according to whether the starred figure is like him, sometimes like him, or not like him.

Scoring of the PSC is based on placement of the card and the card value, weighted in terms of importance to a child's self-concept. The rationale for this type of scoring was derived from Mc Candless' theory that self-concept is composed of an individual's rating of himself in certain areas and the value of these areas. Scores on the test distinguish students with positive and negative self-concepts as viewed by others.

One of four female Es administered the test and supervised the children with the assistance of the classroom teacher and/or an aide. In some cases there was a question regarding the validity of a child's test score because of possible misunderstanding or confusion. Such tests were eliminated without being scored.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The tests results were machine scored, and the data computer analyzed using a three-way analysis of variance which determined main effects of sex, nursery school experience versus no nursery school experience, target versus non-target, and the interactions among these three variables for the kindergarten sample. (Table 1.) Differences significant at the .05 level were found between nursery school and non-nursery school Ss on the self-concept test, in favor of the nursery school group. This suggests that nursery school experience had a beneficial effect on the self-concept of participants. Socioeconomic level was also important; students in non-target schools scored higher than students attending the target schools ($p < .01$), indicating that the disadvantaged have more negative self-concepts than their nondisadvantaged counterparts. Sex differences also were evident from the analysis, girls showing more positive self-concepts than boys ($p < .05$).

Nursery school non-target Ss had the highest self-concept scores, followed in order by non-nursery school non-target Ss, nursery school target Ss, and last, non-nursery school target Ss (Table 2). This trend indicates that target children who have nursery school experience are higher in self-conceptthan their disadvantaged counterparts who do not have nursery school experience. Even with nursery school experience the disadvantaged score lower on the self-concept measure than advantaged children who either have or have not been to nursery school .

TABLE 1. Summary of the Analysis of Variance

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	df	F-Ratio	Probability
Between Sex	488.887	1	4.4071	.0341*
Between nursery experience	597.948	1	5.3903	.0195*
Between target, non-target	772.443	1	6.9633	.0085*
Interaction S x NE	28.509	1	.2570	.6187
Interaction S x T-NT	86.376	1	.7787	.6182
Interaction NE x T-NT	308.123	1	2.7776	.0923

TABLE 2. Number, Mean, and Standard Deviation of Groups

Group	N	Mean	S.D.
Female nursery nontarget	80	63.5263	10.1721
Female nursery target	74	61.6948	8.0537
Female nonnursery nontarget	26	61.6301	8.5962
Male nonnursery nontarget	28	61.4524	8.3749
Male nursery nontarget	62	61.0077	11.3645
Male nursery target	81	60.6851	9.0348
Female nonnursery target	44	59.5699	10.2052
Male nonnursery target	39	53.9728	17.5614

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DISCUSSION

This study was part of a larger decision-oriented research project designed to evaluate the effectiveness of nursery school experiences on conceptual and affective development of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children. Members of the Mishawaka school staff believed that children who have had nursery school experience are more successful academically and socially in kindergarten and elementary school than children who have had no nursery school experience.

The results of this investigation confirm the beliefs that compensatory preschool programs can be effective in enhancing self-concepts of children, disadvantaged or otherwise.

There are a number of limitations to this study which require that caution be used in interpreting and generalizing from the data presented here. Two major concerns in design should be noted. First, the testing situations could not be rigidly controlled, and the conditions of test administration differed from class to class. However, the testing situation closely resembled a normal classroom acitvity so it is felt that the normality of the children's environment resulted in more accurate reflections of self-concept than would have been obtained in a laboratory study. A second problem in design was that the researchers had no means of assessing the effects of the kindergarten experience intervening between nursery school experience and the testing date.

In some schools, nursery and non-nursery kindergarten children attended separate classes; in other schools the two groups were combined. This difference in classroom composition could have affected the children's self-concepts differentially.

Several criticisms of other evaluations of compensatory education programs are applicable to the present study. Zimiles (1968) pointed out that research efforts aimed at program evaluation must be longitudinal in nature to measure both long-term effects and incubation effects, those which first begin to manifest themselves at later points in time as a result of their interaction with subsequent experiences. The present study involved only one measure of self-concept, taken midway through the kindergarten year. Also, Campbell and Erlebacher (1970) have criticized ex post facto designs. The present investigation was made after the children had entered kindergarten, subsequent either to having had or not had nursery school experience. The groups were not randomly assigned to the nursery school or non-nursery school conditions, and it is possible that there were pre-existing differences between the children whose parents enrolled them in nursery school and those whose parents did not.

Several suggestions can be made for future study in the area. The longitudinal approach would be more effective as a means of determining long-range effects. Also, testing done on an individual rather than group basis would be desirable; in this way it could be more certain that Ss understand the task and are closely reflecting their self-concepts in their responses.

SUMMARY

Analysis of the data gathered in the kindergarten classes indicated that compensatory education at a preschool level enhanced the self-concepts of both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children, that disadvantaged children had lower self-concepts than nondisadvantaged children, and that girls were found to have a more positive self-concept than boys.

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